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## **JAPAN AND FOREIGN TERRITORY STRIKE: DEBATE, DETERRENCE, AND DEFENSE STRENGTH**

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### **Abstract**

The increased frequency of debate in Japan over foreign territory strike points to it being officially affirmed as a Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF) mission in the near future. This article explores the foreign territory strike debate through the lens of the four key questions that have structured the post-war debate on all new overseas SDF operations: is it constitutional?; is it (militarily) plausible?; is it (strategically) wise?; and, is it (politically) acceptable? After discussing the contours of the Japanese post-war legal and policy debate on the use of force in foreign territory, the article describes contemporary doubts over the tactical effectiveness and strategic opportunity cost of configuring the SDF to conduct overseas strike operations—especially for missile defense purposes. Foreign territory strike would divert scarce fiscal resources and political attention from adaptations that enhance the US-Japan alliance’s posture resilience and enable it to sustainably generate force even after an initial attack, thereby augmenting regional deterrence. The article concludes by noting that political barriers could also still prevent the mission from being substantively and credibly implemented. Acrimonious domestic debate on foreign territory strike could also hamstring government attempts to attract public buy-in for future defense transformation in areas of greater priority and that add more to deterrence than the acquisition of modest strike capabilities.

**Keywords:** Self-Defense-Force, overseas strike operations, legal and policy debate, political barriers

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### **New Overseas SDF Operations**

The Japanese government has incrementally and consistently affirmed a wide range of new missions for the SDF since the 1970s. Then, a quiet focus on anti-submarine warfare operations against the Soviet Union to Japan's north was embraced by the SDF as an alliance contribution (Patalano, 2008). The SDF soon began participating in overseas training exercises like RIMPAC (Woolley & Woolley 1996), and the government also authorized the SDF to defend Japan's Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) out to 1000 nautical miles in the 1980s (Graham 2005). In the 1990s, the government passed legislation enabling SDF contributions to United Nations Peace Keeping Operations (UNPKOs) and post-ceasefire non-combat operations such as minesweeping (Hatakeyama, 2014). Legislation passed in 1999 also established the legal basis for the SDF to provide non-combatant, logistical rear area support (*kōhō chiiki shien*) to foreign military operations in areas around Japan (*shuuhen jitai*) that, "if left unchecked, could result in an armed attack against Japan" (Galic, 2019). Special measures laws were enacted based on this legislation in the new millennium, and Tokyo dispatched all three branches of the SDF to the Indian Ocean and/or Iraq to provide logistical or reconstruction assistance to the United States and other foreign militaries (Harano, 2015). The dispatch of naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden to protect foreign commercial vessels followed the passage of anti-piracy legislation in 2009 (Cabinet Secretariat, 2015). The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government later established Japan's first long-term post-war military base in Djibouti ostensibly to cooperate with other nations on anti-piracy operations. The base was subsequently expanded and became a base for SDF training and for regional evacuation operations.

In 2015, the Japanese parliament passed omnibus legislation that, to an unprecedented degree, loosened prior restrictions on both the "use of weapons" (*buki no shiyō*) and the "use of force" (*buryoku no kōshi*) during overseas SDF operations. In legal terms, the use of weapons is simply the use of equipment and

machinery to directly kill or harm people, or to destroy physical objects. The 2015 Peace and Security Legislation (PSL) granted Japan's National Security Council (NSC) the authority to permit the SDF to use weapons to protect foreign military assets during select peacetime operations, and in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations to protect or even rescue members of the same operation (Bosack, 2017). The SDF would also be able to use weapons during rescue missions in foreign territory to protect evacuees if operations took place outside of a combat zone and Tokyo attained the consent of local governing entities. This authority was eventually invoked in August 2021 to evacuate Japanese and Afghan nationals from Afghanistan (Bosack, 2021).

However, not all uses of weapons are equivalent to the use of force. The use of force is defined by the Japanese government as acts of combat by agents of states or state-like organizations engaged in international armed conflict (MOD, 2019: 248). The post-war Japanese government proscribed the use of force by the Japanese military outside of a direct, organised, and pre-meditated attack on Japan up until the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9 of the constitution by the Abe administration (Kurosaki, 2018). The reinterpretation process resulted in new conditions for the use of force and envisaged the development of “seamless security legislation to ensure Japan's survival” that would enable the SDF to exercise ‘limited’ collective self-defense rights for the first time in the post-war period (MOD, 2019: 198). The 2015 passage of the PSL resulted in the SDF being able to make contributions in international waters and airspace to use of force operations by other nations in a “close relationship with Japan” during so-called “survival-threatening situations” (*sonritsu kiki jitai*) where an attack on Japan may be imminent or anticipated (Kurosaki, 2018; Liff, 2018). The PSL also expanded and regularized the SDF's ability to provide non-combatant logistical and other support contributions to international peace support activities that have “an important influence on Japan's security” as well as operations authorised by the United Nations (Bosack, 2017; Effinowicz, 2019).

### **The Use of Force in Foreign Territory in Post-War Japan**

While still highly regulated by law, the accreted adaptations over the last 40 years have enhanced the Japanese government's ability to use the SDF for Japan's own security and as a tool of diplomacy and strategy. As various formerly assumed-to-be red lines regarding overseas dispatch, the use of weapons, and the use of force have blurred, one important line stands out in sharp relief as marking the barrier between the antimilitarist restraint of the post-war era and the full 'normalization' of the SDF as a military: the purposive use of force in the territorial land, sea, and air space of another country. Post-war Diet debates have focused on the exercise of two forms of such force: combat dispatch (*kaigai hahei*) and foreign territory strike.

#### **Kaigai Hahei**

*Kaigai hahei* is the dispatch of troops for the explicit purpose of engaging in combat against a state or state-like actor inside another nation's territory. In Japan's post-war constitutional debate all governments have affirmed that combat dispatch is proscribed—even if a state consents to Japan dispatching the SDF to its own territory during an ongoing conflict (Komori, 1961; Kurosaki, 2018). *Kaigai hahei* is distinguished in Japanese constitutional interpretation from *kaigai haken*, which is the dispatch of the SDF overseas for "peaceful purposes" not requiring or anticipating the use of force or the entry of forces into a combat zone (Keddell, 1993: 177-8; Haley, 2005:30-32).

Even when Abe announced in 2014 that he had reinterpreted the constitution to allow Japan to exercise limited collective self-defense rights, he emphasised that the new interpretation or enabling legislation would still not allow Japan to become a "nation that can go to war" (*nihon ga futatabi sensou wo suru kuni ni naru to itta gokai ga arimasu*). Abe's comments pointed to Article 9 of the Japanese constitution and its prohibition on the possession and use of war

potential for inflicting “catastrophic damage” (*kaimetsu-teki na hakai*), and on the exercise of belligerency rights, which under international law govern the ability of militaries to use lethal force against each other and occupy/invade foreign territories during wartime (Moriya, 1999; Inaba, 2020: 42-43). According to Abe, the SDF would still not deliberately enter a combat zone outside of Japan, “would never join armed conflicts such as the Gulf War and Iraq War with the intent of using force”, or engage in “acts like launching air strikes, shelling, and forcibly entering the enemy’s territory” based on the exercise of collective self-defense (Wallace, 2015: 282-286).

PSL deliberations did, however, raise a unique scenario pertaining to the Strait of Hormuz and whether *kaigai hahei* would remain proscribed going forward. Ships carrying 80 percent of Japan’s crude oil imports currently use a narrow three-kilometre passage to transit the Strait of Hormuz, and blockage of this passage with mines or active forces would have a major impact on resource and energy-poor Japan. The Strait of Hormuz is, however, entirely covered by the territorial seas of Iran and Oman. If a coastal state decided to mine Hormuz, safe passage would require minesweeping in foreign territory. This “simple act of removing a dangerous object” during an ongoing conflict also technically constitutes the use of force under international law (Fujisue, 2015). Would Japan be able to conduct minesweeping missions in the Hormuz Strait without a formal ceasefire?

The Japanese government argued that, “in general”, *kaigai hahei* would remain prohibited. However, it claimed a Hormuz exception where SDF dispatch to use “passive and restricted” force (like minesweeping) might be required in the foreign territory of another nation to ensure Japan’s survival (Fujisue, 2015). The implausibility of the hypothetical scenario together with the unrealistic conditions placed on minesweeping operations in these waters during Diet deliberations, however, gradually transformed the ‘Hormuz exception’ (Kurosaki, 2018) to the *kaigai hahei* ban into the epitome of ‘the exception that proves the rule’. The

government established that the SDF could not be dispatched to the Strait of Hormuz for “economic impact reasons” (Mainichi Shimbun, 2015) alone and could only conduct minesweeping there without a formal ceasefire—and only minesweeping—if failure to do so would precipitate a threat to Japan’s existence. Thus, dispatch could not take place until Japan’s energy reserves had run out and “life-or-death” effects were being felt (such as citizens dying from cold). The government estimated in the Diet that this would take 6 months (Jiji, 2015).

Furthermore, the hypothetical Hormuz activities would require prior Diet approval, and minesweeping units could only use force in a “passive” and “restricted” sense by removing the mines—that is, they could only operate if they did not require protection and there was little possibility of their being attacked and their activities could be completed “safely”—despite nearby Iranian military installations (Fujisue, 2015). The SDF could also not conduct minesweeping in Hormuz waters while it was also providing logistical support to partner militaries operating close by (NHK, 2015). The very premise of Japan being starved of energy due to Iran enforcing a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz with mines alone for an extended period was also questioned. If it succeeded, Iran would create its own ‘survival threatening situation’ by mining the Strait for an extended period. More likely, however, Iran would fail: its ability to lay mines is extremely limited relative to the offensive counter-mine warfare capabilities possessed by the United States and others (O’Neil & Talmadge, 2009; Montani, 2015). The plausibility of the Strait remaining mined for 6 months, without intervention by others or Iran militarily challenging minesweeping activities (a condition of Japanese dispatch), and where only Japan’s minesweeping capabilities could resolve the situation, was, according to one former Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) officer and military analyst, “beyond absurd” (Montani, 2015). The answer to the constitutionality question around *kaigai hahei* effectively remains ‘no’.

Events soon revealed the continued salience of combined constitutional, legal, and public opinion restrictions on Japan’s ability to operate overseas,

including during a Hormuz contingency. In July 2019, amid US-Iran tensions and an unidentified attack on two tankers, the United States proposed a military coalition to patrol the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait off the coast of Yemen. Donald Trump soon named Japan as a nation that “should be protecting [its] own ships” in the area, including Hormuz (Fang, 2019). However, the Japanese government reviewed its legislation and found no suitable basis to meet the President’s demands (Ishinabe, 2019). Despite one of the attacked tankers being operated by a Japanese company, Minister of Defense Iwaya Takeshi elaborated that “not every violation of the prohibition on the use of force triggers the right to self-defense”, and that, even if Iranian agents were involved, the attack was not directed towards Japan as “an organized, premeditated use of force against a state” (Effinowicz, 2019). In fact, Tokyo determined that the situation could not even be considered an “important influence” situation.

Tokyo decided to shelve deliberation on the publicly sensitive mission until after the July 2019 House of Councillors election, hoping international tensions would settle. Tokyo eventually dispatched the Takanami destroyer and two P-3C surveillance craft in February 2020, but limited operations to independent “research and study” as allowed by an obscure provision in the Ministry of Defense Establishment Law (Pugliese & Maslow, 2019). The MSDF would not, however, operate in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. If an attack was initiated on civilian vessels (MOD, 2019b), operations could be switched to a Maritime Security Action (*kaijō keibi kōdō*)—a form of maritime policing under the SDF Law rather than the use of force, and an action that can only be carried out on the high seas or in Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone or territory. The use of weapons would also be limited to the immediate protection of Japan-related ships (registered in Japan or carrying cargo to Japan), meaning foreign ships would have to be left alone even if attacked in front of the SDF.

### Foreign Territory Strike

Tokyo has more constitutional leeway on the second form of the purposive use of force in foreign territory: missile strikes by the SDF on military positions in foreign territory to stop missile attacks on Japan. In a 1956 Diet statement, Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichirō straightforwardly said: “I cannot believe that it is the constitution’s intention for us to sit and wait for our own destruction” (Hatoyama, 1956). Hatoyama indicated that Japan could respond to overseas missile attacks in the face of an “imminent illegal invasion” by targeting foreign missile bases if there were no other options, and the Japanese response was limited to the “the minimum measures unavoidably necessary”. Whether Hatoyama and subsequent governmental statements on the issue constitutionally permitted pre-emptive strikes (*sensei kōgeki*) in foreign territories before the onset of an attack on Japan has been contested (Samuels, 2007: 47, 58; Schoff & Song, 2017). Government interpretations insist that attacks on foreign military positions cannot be justified by reference to strategic advantage or convenience, thereby ruling out “preventive” strikes (Ino, 1959; Schoff and Song, 2017). The government also notes that preemptive strikes based only on a perception of imminent threat are prohibited under the UN Charter and that Article 88 (Paragraph 2) of the Self-Defense Force (SDF) Law requires any use of force by Japan to remain consistent with international law (Norota, 1999; Abe, 2017). Recent statements by some government officials do, however, acknowledge the international legality and constitutional permissibility of (militarily implausible) “at launch” or “armed-attack-initiation” strikes (Schoff & Song, 2017; Kurosaki, 2020).

Legal parsing aside, it is nevertheless clear that striking missile positions in foreign countries once an attack has begun is a constitutionally admissible form of self-defense. Until now, however, Tokyo eschewed even this narrow ‘missile defense’-focused conception of foreign territory strike as declaratory policy, as a component of alliance role sharing, and as a legal mission under the SDF Law. Until recently, it also avoided accumulating the necessary military components

required for such a mission. Relying on alliance role division of ‘spear’ and ‘shield’, where the (nuclear tipped) spear of the United States would suffice for strategic deterrence, the strike-as-missile-defense scenario was considered highly unrealistic and far beyond the capabilities of a Japanese military only then beginning remilitarization during the Cold War. In addition to plausibility doubts, Tokyo’s attempt to strategically reengage with Asia while still burdened with its wartime reputation also made it sensible to de-emphasise the SDF’s power projection capabilities. The Japanese public also required reassurance. It remained sensitive throughout the Cold War to any possibility of the SDF engaging in opportunistic or destructive actions overseas that would bring back the “horrors of war through the action of government” to the Japanese archipelago, thereby undermining Japan’s nascent economic recovery, its citizens’ enjoyment of democracy and social and cultural wellbeing, and Japan’s international rehabilitation (Wallace, 2015). Thus, while foreign territory strike missions were not automatically deemed unconstitutional, the Japanese government’s commitment in 1957 to the principle of *senshu bōei* (Abe, 2015; Iwama & Murano, 2021), or “exclusively defense-oriented policy”, essentially represented a ‘no’ answer to the questions of strategic wisdom and political acceptability around foreign territory strike.

### **A New Debate Stirs**

As North Korea enhances its power projection capabilities in the post-war period, different answers to the foreign territory strike question are being entertained in Japan. Schoff and Song (2017) note that the first official ruling LDP study panel on strike capabilities directly followed North Korea’s Taepodong-1 missile test in 1998. The first significant public debate, however, took place in 2003. Less than a month after North Korea’s demonstration of a missile with the speed, range, and accuracy to reach Japan within ten minutes and do significant damage, the United States initiated its second war against Iraq. Like the 1991 Gulf War, the

Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile (hereafter, Tomahawk) took centre stage as American and British militaries relentlessly and precisely dismembered Iraq's political and military infrastructure. Tokyo was watching: one Japanese defense official marvelled at the time how the Tomahawk "could hit a soccer goal in Hakata if launched from Tokyo" (Hirata, 2003).

In response to Diet questioning by Maehara Seiji, then defense chief Ishiba Shigeru explicitly affirmed that the Tomahawk was not a constitutionally prohibited, "exclusively offensive" weapon capable of causing catastrophic destruction inside another country's territory, and therefore was not "war potential" (Ishiba, 2003). Later the same day, Prime Minister Koizumi backed up his cabinet colleague: "isn't it fine to investigate? We're committed to *senshu bōei*; this won't change" (Hirata, 2003). The Japan Defense Agency (now Ministry of Defense) was soon investigating the acquisition of the Tomahawk from the United States. It failed to gain its ally's acquiescence and the pursuit of ballistic missile defense (BMD) in the alliance context refocused discussion temporarily in Japan. Various LDP politicians, including former prime ministers Asō Tarō and Abe Shinzō, and even major opposition politicians such as Maehara, nevertheless continued to raise the possibility of Japan needing its own strike capabilities (Schoff & Song, 2017) until the DPJ took power in 2009.

When the LDP stormed back into power in late-2012 under Abe, it appeared determined to push forward on the strike agenda and effect a change in alliance role sharing. The LDP announced support for an official government study on strike capabilities to be included in Japan's National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), a key statement detailing Japan's mid-range defense priorities (LDP, 2013). In the official NDPG for 2014 and Beyond, the suggestion was watered down out of consideration for the LDP's still nominally 'pacifist' coalition partner, Komeito: it called for a general study on "response capability" to ballistic missile threats and for "appropriate" alliance role-sharing (MOD, 2014). Schoff and Song note that the Abe administration in the 2017 Defense

White Paper then “laid the rhetorical groundwork” for a more concerted push on foreign territory strike by highlighting that North Korea’s military development constituted a “new level of threat” (*aratana dankai no kyōi*) to Japan and the region.” The 2019 NDPG followed this up with a section on “Comprehensive Air and Missile Defense Capability” that identified Japan potentially adopting a “form of response capability to address the means for missile launch and related facilities”, although it only committed to “continue to study” the option (MOD, 2018).

Aegis Ashore’s cancellation in 2020 then provided another opportunity to advance the strike debate by drawing attention to interceptor-focused BMD limitations. Using active electronically scanned arrays (AESA) more resistant to jamming and difficult to detect, Japan’s selection of Lockheed Martin’s AN/SPY 7 radar for the land-based Aegis Ashore system promised greater precision and three times more coverage for the interception of incoming ballistic missiles than the passive phased array AN/SPY-1D radars then installed on Aegis-equipped MSDF and US Navy destroyers. In addition to enhanced power generation capacity, land-based deployment would allow 24/7 coverage and free up the MSDF and US Navy from ballistic missile defense duties. The alternatives to a land-based Aegis Ashore would, however, be both less effective and more expensive. Subsequent to Tokyo’s initial 2017 commitment to procure Aegis Ashore, North Korea had also demonstrated different types of ballistic missiles with harder-to-intercept trajectories and enhanced its ability to overwhelm interceptor-based defenses with barrages of cheaper missiles (Kosaka, 2020; Murano, 2020).

These regional military developments, Aegis Ashore’s cancellation, President Trump’s enthusiasm for foreign arms sales compared to previous presidents who refused to sell Tomahawks to Japan, together with renewed doubts about Japan’s “excessive dependence on the U.S. for its defense”, moved the LDP to establish a task force to re-evaluate Japan’s missile defense options in July 2020

(Tajima, 2020; Tanaka, 2020a; Corben, 2020). One option strongly supported by some defense conservatives, such as former defense minister Nakatani Gen and former Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Satō Masahisa, was for a Tomahawk-enabled long-range strike capability (Mori, 2020a; Sato, 2020; Tanaka, 2020a). When the task force submitted its proposals to Prime Minister Abe in August, it recommended the “need for new measures that will heighten deterrence, including possession of the capability of preventing ballistic missile launches even from within enemy territory” (Nikkei Shimbun, 2020a), or what it called “missile interdiction” (*aite ryōikinai de soshi*). Abe immediately convened a meeting of the NSC to consider the changes, promising to “move ahead in setting a new direction and swiftly implement” new measures (Asahi Shimbun, 2020a). In a prime minister’s statement released just before leaving office, Abe questioned his government’s own BMD plans by asking, “is it really possible to protect people’s lives and peace of mind simply by improving our interceptor capability?” (Maeda, 2021: 17).

Abe’s successor, Suga Yoshihide, did not move swiftly or implement the measures. However, candidates vying to replace Suga as LDP leader and prime minister showed greater enthusiasm during the September 2021 LDP presidential race. Takaichi Sanae argued that Japan needed the ability to retaliate against North Korea with longer-range missiles and should also acquire electromagnetic pulse weapons and cyber-capabilities to neutralise missile attacks at launch (Jiji, 2021a). Prime minister-to-be Kishida Fumio, formerly a dovish politician on national security, labelled “foreign base attack” (*tekikichi kōgeki*) a powerful and viable option for Japan. The LDP’s manifesto for the October 2021 House of Representatives election, strongly influenced by Takaichi, indirectly referenced the option (LDP, 2021). China and North Korea’s testing of new missiles just as election campaigning began in Japan provided Kishida the opportunity to demonstrate his hawkish bona fides by proposing that “enemy base attack”

capability be included in the revisions to the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS) and other defense-related policy documents (Oohashi, 2021).

### **Is it (Militarily) Plausible?**

On paper, long-range guided missiles like the Tomahawk appear to meet Japan's need for a precise countermeasure against North Korean missile launches (Sato, 2020). It would allow the SDF to launch long-range strikes from Japanese territory "when unavoidably necessary" against missile positions on the Korean Peninsula well beyond North Korea's threat envelope while limiting the scale of destruction. The battle-proven Tomahawk (\$1.8 million for Block IV) is also considerably cheaper than a SM-3 Block IIA BMD interceptor (\$18.4 million), which is still untested in battle. The Japanese government has other options for "missile interdiction" strike missions if Tomahawk acquisition is denied (Jiji 2020a; Kyodo, 2020). Tokyo recently purchased the Norwegian Joint Strike Missile (JSM) for a planned procurement of over 100 F-35 fighter jets (Sankei Shimbun, 2017). The JSM has a range of 500kms and fits into the F-35's internal weapons bay, thereby preserving the fighter's low observability characteristics while extending its kinetic reach. Tokyo purchased four KC-46A in-air refuelling tankers that will extend or sustain in flight Japan's new fighters and their now enhanced ordnance (Jiji, 2019), and is also modifying the Izumo and Kaga helicopter destroyers to enable them to support F-35B operations as an aircraft carrier. The Japanese government also plans to reconfigure Japan's Type-12 missile for multiple launch platforms and extend its maximum range to 900 kilometres or more (Maeda, 2021: 18). In November 2021, it announced it would dedicate ¥100 billion (US\$880 million) to develop a land-based variant for deployment after 2025, and ship-launched and fighter variants from 2026 and 2028, respectively (Nikkei Asia, 2021a). Tokyo is also investing in development of indigenous hypersonic "elemental technologies" such as SCRAM-jet propulsion, hard-to-intercept hyper velocity boost-glide vehicles (ostensibly for

“island defense”), and stand-off electronic warfare capabilities (Maetani, 2018; Axe, 2020).

The type of missile threat North Korea poses in 2021 is, however, quite different from when Ishiba initiated public debate in 2003. North Korea’s base hardening and the building of underground tunnels, hangars, and military facilities makes pre-emption very unlikely with conventional cruise missiles. The ‘subsonic’ Tomahawk is also too slow as a first-line missile defense option, especially if fired from its ‘safer’ outer ranges as envisioned by strike proponents (Iwama & Murano, 2021). North Korea now fields solid-fuelled intermediate range ballistic missiles launchable from tracked transporter erector launchers (TELs)—manoeuvrable, multi-terrain, and increasingly reusable mobile launch platforms. TEL operators require fewer support vehicles compared to fixed site launches, need less preparation time to launch missiles (as little as five minutes), have greater choice of launch location, and can take advantage of concealment. Few practical options also exist for neutralizing North Korean platforms at launch with (non-nuclear) electromagnetic and offensive cyber capabilities (Chuunichi Shimbun, 2021). Cruise missile-enabled strike is also not going to be useful against submarine-launched missiles (Park & Kim, 2016).

Furthermore, even partial success in a missile interdiction role requires the SDF to become familiar with expensive and costly-to-maintain support platforms that it would ultimately have to operate close to contested DPRK territory (Takahashi, 2020a; Hornung, 2020a). Such platforms include space and ISR-enabled support systems to identify, locate, and track targets; airborne platforms to suppress enemy air defenses, conduct electronic warfare, disrupt communications, and deploy anti-radiation missiles against radar installations; and systems to replenish fuel and ordnance for sustained operations after an initial counterattack (Takahashi, 2020a; Hornung, 2020a; Jiji, 2020b). Japan has already started acquiring (E-767 AWACS, E-2D Advanced Hawkeye, KC-46A in-air refuelling tanker aircraft) or thought about acquiring systems (EA-18G Growler,

Global Hawk) that would help. Much greater unit numbers will be needed, however, as well as UAVs and loitering munitions, due to distribution, disaggregation and redundancy requirements (Kata, 2018). Assuming Japan pays the initial outlays for the necessary equipment, estimated to be tens of billions of dollars (Reuters, 2014), simply maintaining these sophisticated systems could add an additional US\$1 billion dollars to the annual defense budget (Abe, 2020).

Despite this cost, a ‘Nodong Hunt’ by Japan even with enhanced ISR and support is likely to be at best partially successful and mostly an exercise in operational disruption and damage mitigation (Jimbo, 2020; Taoka, 2021; Mori, 2020c). Such effects can contribute to deterrence if it ensures that the United States and Japan remain capable of generating force following an initial attack. However, prioritization of traditional interceptor-based BMD and other measures designed to enhance the resilience or survivability of US-Japan forces—and for civil defense—is essential on the assumption that some missiles will make it through the midcourse and terminal BMD layers (Mori, 2020c; Iwama & Murano, 2021). Only after addressing these priorities would a long-range strike capability usefully contribute to suppressant effects that disrupt the rate and simultaneity of subsequent attacks and decrease the raw number of attack nodes capable of attacking Japan (Mori, 2020c). However, given that the United States and South Korea enjoy geographic proximity to North Korea relative to Japan, they are much better situated to establish air dominance over the Korean Peninsula and to hunt and eliminate missile launchers (Taoka, 2021). Japan, on the other hand, could maximize its contribution to deterrence by supporting the deployment of regional BMD architecture and enhancing posture resilience to assure adversaries that the United States and its allies will remain capable of responding following any sudden attack (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2018a: 131-137, 153-156).

### **Is it (Strategically) Wise?**

Reservations about the strategic opportunity cost of committing to developing strike capabilities have also been raised inside and outside Japan. Former defense minister Kōno Tarō argued during the recent LDP leadership race that Japan needs a “debate on deterrence instead of [on] base strike capabilities,” and that strategy should drive capability acquisition and spending targets, rather than the other way around (Tajima, Tobita, & Kobara, 2021; Jiji, 2020d). Former defense minister Ishiba Shigeru also now questions the wisdom of Japan pursuing long-range strike capabilities despite his past advocacy. Ishiba and former defense minister Iwaya argued in mid-2020 that contemporary foreign territory strike discussions failed to consider likely mission effectiveness relative to costs, alliance functioning and American preferences, and potentially communicated unintended messages to its ally and the region regarding Japan’s faith in the alliance and United States’ nuclear umbrella (Mainichi Shimbun, 2020; Jiji, 2020c; Nishii, 2020).

Other sceptics note that Japanese defense debates tend to focus on high-tech, expensive, and symbolic silver bullet solutions to Japan’s security problems while investments into affordable, but symbolically prosaic, lower technology adaptations are overlooked (Newsham 2020a; Jimbo, 2020; Heginbotham and Samuels, 2018a; Schadlow & Murano, 2021). While acknowledging areas of operational excellence such as minesweeping and anti-submarine warfare, RAND’s Jeffery Hornung questions whether the SDF can effectively, and sustainability contribute to a high-end East China Sea contingency alongside a United States burdened with establishing and maintaining maritime control/aerial dominance. With extra spending, Tokyo could instead address long-standing SDF deficiencies in ISR capabilities, air/sea lift, and logistical support, as well as purchase greater numbers of agile and affordable air and maritime platforms (Hornung, 2020c). To make Japan’s military posture (and the alliance’s) more resilient and survivable, Tokyo could also invest in more extensive

base hardening initiatives, look at options for disaggregating capabilities and dispersing bases, airfields, and ports, and consider deceptive deployment of units, fuel, and ammunition (Heginbotham & Samuels 2018b; Hornung, 2020a; Newsham, 2020a; Tanaka, 2020b).

A serious attempt at configuring the SDF to undertake foreign territory strike missions would, however, be one more capability set to compete for already limited defense yen. Rising maintenance costs soak up a significant amount of new spending due in part to the higher intensity of SDF operations as Tokyo seeks to project greater power beyond Northeast Asia as well as contend with “attrition” strategies from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia closer to home (Patalano, 2020; MOD, 2020). These pressures contribute to procurement and system rollout delays, as does the increase in purchases of expensive foreign platforms with a weakened yen. Recently there has been a crowding out of naval shipbuilding by the purchase of high-end American aircraft, and only a modest uptick in Japan Coast Guard shipbuilding (Nikkei Asia, 2018; Wallace, 2020). Tokyo also does not invest enough in R&D to future proof Japan’s military capabilities (Sankei Shimbun, 2020, 2021).

The likely long-term outcome is the erosion of ‘core’ capabilities as temptations for the SDF to adorn itself with disparate pockets of high-end capabilities accelerate in the current geopolitical environment. Ken Jimbo (2020) is most pointed when he notes that:

If Japan doesn’t make clear the strategic rationale for allocating scarce resources to certain security or defense priorities, the risk of an inefficient or half-baked defense posture is high. For example, while leaving the defense budget as it essentially is, introducing a strategically meaningless level of long-range strike capability while not enhancing further BMD (after Aegis Ashore cancellation), will leave Aegis warships (over)burdened with missile defense duties, ultimately resulting in the neglect of the defense of the southwest maritime regions around

Japan. It is thus easy to see how this might lead to the collapse of Japan's overall defense portfolio [Author's translation].

Foreign territory strike also raises some tricky diplomatic questions regarding command-and-control structures for Japan (Hornung, 2020b). The US-Japan alliance provides strategic depth for the US-ROK alliance, while South Korea could provide essential intelligence and real time information on North Korean activities as well as a forward operating launchpad for Japan for any Peninsula contingencies (Mori, 2020b). This remains a political distant prospect, however, as neither Japan nor South Korea appears willing to turn down the heat on pointed historical issues that confound military cooperation and intelligence sharing. Japan's inability to deepen the military relationship with South Korea even while wishing to play a role in strike missions on the Korean Peninsula thus places additional diplomatic and coordination burdens on the United States that would be most unwelcome during wartime.

### **Foreign Territory Strike Beyond Missile Defense—and North Korea?**

North Korea, and missile interdiction, are not the only concerns stimulating Japanese debate over foreign territory strike. The PRC has also accelerated its acquisition of conventionally armed missiles that can overwhelm Japan's missile defenses and destroy its military infrastructure and bases. The PRC has also built out its manoeuvre forces, thereby making it unlikely that Japan could prevail in defending "forward" in head-to-head naval and aerial engagements between Chinese and Japanese forces (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2018a: 131). China's military posture has also been configured to complicate United States' operations throughout East Asia and its ability to surge its forces into theatre (Kelly et al, 2014), thereby undermining the ability of America's armed forces to intervene on behalf of Japan and other allies who cannot match China individually.

This geopolitical background compounds residual anxiety in Tokyo about United States' commitment or interest in the region, exacerbated by the Trump administration's questioning of American alliance commitments (Samuels & Wallace, 2018). Tokyo is also watching whether the American withdrawal from Afghanistan under President Biden will result in the United States refocusing its significant military might on deterring Chinese military adventurism in East Asia (Akita, 2021), especially given pressures coming from within the Democratic Party to decrease defense spending (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2021: 160). Renewed ambitions in Japan to leave behind *senshu bōei* ('defensive defense') by enhancing the SDF's ability to strike deeper into Korean and Chinese territory are, therefore, unsurprising (Sato, 2020). Former prime minister Abe asserted in parliament in 2018 that trying to defend Japan based on the restrictions imposed by *senshu bōei* was "extremely difficult", noting that those who attacked first had an "overwhelming advantage" (Suzuki & Wallace, 2018: 720). Former defense minister Nakatani Gen insisted in 2020 that "we cannot take for granted that the United States will retaliate [against North Korea] if we are attacked. There is a need for us to enhance deterrence by developing our own retaliatory capability" (Mori 2020a). Kishi Nobuo—Prime Minister Abe's natural brother and current defense minister—expressed similar sentiments about the alliance in a 2019 *Seiron* article (Kishi, 2019: 217). Kanehara Nobukatsu, a leading strategic thinker, and Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary to Prime Minister Abe for seven years, told NHK in mid-2020 that focusing on attacks against enemy missile positions was too narrow for deterrence purposes (Masuda, 2020). On her appointment to the prime minister advisory board on Future Investment Strategy in July 2020, prominent commentator Lully Miura lamented to the board that dependence on foreign countries "for 60% of its food, 90% of its energy, and 100% of its offensive security capability" had made Japan's prosperity fragile (Miura, 2020).

Japan's accumulation of enhanced power projection capabilities over the last thirty years may have positioned Japan's military establishment to go beyond

detering attacks on Japan through ‘denial’ (or ‘interdiction’) and pursue a more ambitious strategic doctrine: deterrence through punishment (Pugliese & Maslow, 2019). Deterrence by punishment requires the effective communication of the willingness, ability, and preparation to exact an unacceptable cost on the opponent that deters them from initiating hostilities (Iwama & Murano, 2021). Tokyo would therefore need to credibly communicate its ability to assail, weaken or remove the political regimes in Pyongyang or Beijing, systematically destroy the military and socio-economic infrastructure of both countries, and/or inflict massive civilian casualties. However, conventional weapons—and especially cruise missiles—lack sufficient destructive and penetrative power to generate the expected strategic and deterrent effects for even ‘bloody nose’ retaliatory strikes or counterforce operations, let alone countervalue punishment purposes against North Korea or China. The advisability of committing to conventional long-range strikes to deter enemies by threatening them with unacceptable punishment and/or exaggerating the value of such capabilities is also questionable (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2018a: 161; Murano, 2020) given that the likely targets are nuclear-armed authoritarian states that nurture historical antagonism towards Japan due to its militaristic imperial legacy.

A credible autonomous deterrence by punishment posture for Japan in the current environment is, therefore, ultimately a nuclear weapons-enabled posture. Could discussion of moving beyond defensive defense therefore represent a wedge for gradually opening the public up to greater debate about a strategic nuclear deterrent? Japanese politicians publicly arguing that the only way to truly defend Japan is through nuclear weapons are a minor but vocal constituency in Japan. For example, long-time advocate and former Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintarō (The Diplomat, 2011) has been joined by former prime ministers and Osaka mayors in proposing public debate on Japan’s nuclear armament options (Mochizuki, 2007: 303; Johnston, 2012, 2016). Greater public tolerance for such

discussion (Mochizuki, 2007) also suggests a diminished public nuclear aversion (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2021: 161-163).

Nuclear weapons are also not completely off the table from a constitutional point of view. Former prime minister Kishi Nobusuke consistently insisted during his tenure that just because a given weapon is labelled ‘nuclear’ does not automatically make it unconstitutional (Kishi, 1957; Samuels, 2007: 47, 58). This has remained the government’s interpretation ever since (Asahi Shimbun, 2016). Post-war Japanese leaders have also on multiple occasions quietly considered the nuclear option, and Samuels and Schoff (2013) note that Tokyo maintains “viable—and unconcealed—options for the relatively rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons” as a recessed nuclear hedge.

Japan, nevertheless, continues to eschew nuclear weapons as a policy choice, and has legally limited itself to the peaceful use of nuclear energy in domestic law (1955 Basic Atomic Energy Law) and international law by joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The constitutional issue may also not be so easily surmountable. Even Kishi was clear that Japan could not possess large-scale nuclear weapons that would serve as a nuclear deterrent for ‘catastrophic’ punishment purposes as such weapons would constitute war potential well beyond the minimum necessary for self-defense (Kishi, 1958, 1959a,b). It was understood at this time that the constitution would at most allow for “small scale nuclear weapons for defensive purposes” (*bōei-yō kogata kakuheiki*) that do not pose an “aggressive threat to another nation”, rather than for “strategic” purposes (Kotaki, 1957; Ino, 1959; Emmerson, 1973: 343).

It is important to recognize that the international environment Kishi was operating within was the high cold war era before nuclear weapons came to be conceived of predominantly in terms of high-yield weapons for ‘mutually assured destruction’. This was an era where lower-yield weapons for in-theatre deployment or devices for defensive—or even industrial—purposes were gaining increasing attention (Emmerson, 1973: 348-9). Tactical nuclear weapons—many

of which were deployed to Okinawa by the United States military—including nuclear depth charges, nuclear artillery, surface-to-air missiles (Nike Hercules), nuclear tipped anti-ballistic missile (Hercules Zeus), air-to-air missiles (AIM-26 Falcon), and “Honest Johns”. In fact, when asked about permissible forms of nuclear weapons, Kishi in 1959 noted that, “as a matter of pure constitutional interpretation,” if Japan wanted to introduce the nuclear variant of the Honest John, it would not automatically be constitutionally proscribed just because it was a nuclear weapon (Kishi, 1959b). Kishi noted its fundamental purpose was, after all, defensive—the land-launched Honest John only had a 25-kilometre range. Nuclear explosive power for construction purposes was also considered by Japan into the 1960s (Kyodo, 2012). Given extant interpretations, and the difficulty of arguing that a deterrent based on modern ‘strategic’ nuclear weapons would be anything but the archetypical form of war potential capable of catastrophic damage, the deployment of nuclear weapons without constitutional change seems unlikely. As Abe’s only semi-successful attempt at rolling back the ban on collective self-defense shows, the capacity for flexible reinterpretation is not limitless.

Predictions of Japan’s ‘nuclear taboo’ or allergy weakening also have a long, and until now, unsuccessful history. John K. Emmerson, adviser to General MacArthur during the Occupation and deputy chief of mission at the United States Embassy in Tokyo in the 1960s, extensively detailed in 1970 increased technological fascination with nuclear technology in Japan that he felt indicated a rapid softening of the nuclear taboo or allergy (Emmerson, 1973: 339-351). Hudson Institute founder Herman Kahn similarly argued that the Japanese nuclear allergy was “very shallow” in 1970 (Mendel Jr., 1970: 1054). In 1976, 70 percent of American experts in a joint Yomiuri-Gallup survey (Yomiuri Shimbun, 1976: 3) anticipated Japan would go nuclear, including a majority believing it would happen within 10 years. This may have made sense at the time. Several surveys in 1968 and 1969 found a spike in Japanese supporting nuclear armament

to over 20 percent after a decade of antimilitarist agitation and as a brasher, post-war generation of politicians entered conservative politics (Mendel, Jr., 1969: 639; Welfield, 1988: 264-266).

However, these numbers are higher than almost all subsequent surveys touching on independent Japanese nuclear armament (Wallace, 2015: 140-141). For example, NHK asked whether Japan should possess nuclear weapons three times between 2005 and 2015 and found support dropping from 18.9 percent to 15.4 percent, and opposition increasing from 78.3 percent to 81.2 percent (NHK, 2021). The 2020 iteration of the survey, limited to younger respondents in Japan and the United States, found 85 percent of Japanese and 70 percent of Americans rejecting the necessity of nuclear weapons for their country (NHK, 2020). This is consistent with previous findings (Wallace, 2015: 142-143) showing that younger cohorts are more averse to nuclear weapons than older cohorts. Japan Electoral Survey (JES) respondents were asked eight times between 2004 and 2016 whether they agreed with the statement that “Japan should never have nuclear weapons” (JES, 2021). A variety of methods were used to deliver the surveys, but all surveys found disagreement with the statement varied between 8.4 percent and 10.8 percent, except for a 2011 internet-administered survey (13.9 percent). JES shows some evidence of softening in the intensity of agreement between 2004 and 2016, although this softening does not result in affirmative support increasing. In any respect, both the JES and NHK surveys show contemporary Japanese support for nuclear armament is unremarkable when compared with past results going back to the 1950s (Mendel, Jr., 1959).

### **Why Does Japan Have Stand-Off Missiles and Other ‘Offensive’ Weapons?**

Why does Japan have “offensive capabilities” at all unless it is for the purposes of attacking foreign territory (Maeda, 2021: 19)? Tokyo’s acquisition and development of long-range weapons, the military effects they generate, and

constitutional interpretations of their necessity for defense, cannot be disassociated from Japan's strategic geography and the relative qualitative and quantitative capabilities of Japan's adversaries. For example, for the missile interdiction role, the mission effectiveness of long-range cruise missiles depends on adversary air defenses, launcher mobility, and posture resilience. For other operations, not only does it become increasingly dangerous for Japanese forces to approach the Asian mainland during a conflict, but Japan's adversaries also have their own stand-off weapons that threaten Japanese military assets at significant ranges. Enhanced PRC capabilities therefore undermine the utility of SDF anti-ship and anti-air missiles currently in inventory and reduce Japan's ability to contest prospective PRC attempts to assert aerial and maritime control to its southwest.

Enhanced missile ranges and different launch modalities, however, provide the SDF with greater options to hold adversary forces at risk from a variety of different locations in contested battle domains and allow defense in depth. For example, the extension of the range of the Type-12—a truck-launched, anti-ship missile—would allow the SDF to deploy the system to Okinawa's main island. The island has denser air defense networks and topological cover than isolated and vulnerable islands like Miyakojima and Ishigakijima where the Type-12 is currently deployed. Increased range would allow the Type-12 to still cover the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan. Enhanced range will provide options for deploying diversified launch systems up-and-down the Japanese archipelago to frustrate PRC attempts to achieve sea control and hold land taken from Japan, especially as other locations in Japan offer greater opportunities for concealment and system mobility than Okinawa.

Similarly, the F-35B's short take-off and vertical landing ability allows the fighter to use shorter or unimproved runways, as well as partially destroyed airfields, adding to the flexibility and operational survivability of those platforms. Even deployed on Japan's aircraft carriers, physical limitations on operational

intensity, fighter numbers, and fuel and armament carrying-capacity make the F-35B more useful as a naval aviation platform for contesting aerial dominance within Japan's extensive maritime domain than as a platform for inflicting unacceptable costs on an adversary through sustained bombing. On balance, the procurement of these platforms and the military effects they would generate relates more to enabling the SDF to flexibly operate outside or at the outer limits of the enemy's threat envelope in aid of contesting on a more equal footing attempts to assert maritime and aerial control by an adversary in the East China Sea or occupy islands in Japan's southwest (Iwama & Murano, 2021). Indeed, even as he avoided discussion on foreign territory strike missions, former prime minister Suga confirmed Japan's policy of strengthening Japan's "stand-off defense capability to deal with ships" in December 2020 as a supplement to the 2019 NDPG (Cabinet of Japan, 2020).

Such weapons do, nevertheless, allow for "tactically offensive" operations to frustrate an adversary's ability to generate and project power (Heginbotham & Samuels, 2018a: 160-161). If Japan was able to survive an initial conventional attack by the PRC on Japanese military bases and infrastructure, attacks on PRC coastal bases, ports, airfields and runways, ammunition depots, chain-of-command systems, and other fixed facilities could degrade the Chinese military's ability to sustain operations. No longer able to assert maritime and aerial control over the East China Sea during a maritime conflagration or Taiwan contingency, this could potentially deter the PRC from initiating a saturation attack on Japan itself in the first place as it would not be able to subsequently fulfil the conditions for victory (Murano, 2020). While this raises several questions of escalation that seem unwise for Japan to consider outside of the US-Japan alliance context, within the alliance context Japan could offer added value during a US-China conflagration (Akita, 2020). Ballistic missile-based strike would be more effective (and cheaper) for this role than cruise missiles, which are slower and less destructive, even if more precise (Murano, 2020). However, the deployment of

even conventionally armed ballistic missiles by Japan (or the United States) is a politically much more fraught policy option, especially with past constitutional interpretations denying Tokyo the possession of such weapons.

### **Political Acceptability and the Domestic Debate**

The Kishida administration could straightforwardly ‘declare’ foreign territory strike a new SDF mission by writing it into the next iteration of the National Security Strategy (NSS). Several practical political questions stand in the way of its full implementation, however. The Japanese government would still lack an explicit legal basis to authorise such missions due to the positive list approach embedded in the SDF Law (Hikotani, 2018; Bosack, 2020). Parliamentary deliberation could, in turn, agitate an already sceptical public (TBS, 2020; NHK, 2020; TV Asahi, 2020; Nikkei Shimbun, 2020b). Recently enhanced alliance cooperation based on the 2015 PSL, exemplified by Japan’s acquisition of Cooperative Engagement Capability systems which promote integrated fire control between United States and Japanese forces, would feature as opponents questioned whether long-range Japanese missiles would be used in concert with or even by the United States to attack foreign territories in “American wars” in Asia (Maeda, 2021:20) and the Middle East (Handa, 2020). This possibility was raised during security legislation debate in 2015, forcing the government to insist that an illegal and imminent armed attack on Japan would still need to take place for foreign territory strike of any kind by Japan to be considered constitutionally permissible (Mutō, 2014; Schoff & Song, 2017; Kurosaki, 2018).

Following the 2021 House of Representatives election, the LDP does have the option of relying on smaller hawkish parties instead of Komeito to pass legislation through both houses (Nikkei Shimbun, 2020c). The LDP, however, relies as much as ever on electoral cooperation with Komeito in single member districts (SMDs) and, therefore, its lower house majority. Citing public scepticism,

Komeito is likely to exert considerable pressure on the LDP to water down any strike proposal (Asahi Shimbun, 2020b; Harris & McLaughlin, 2021), and the LDP has already delayed revision of the NSS until after the July 2022 House of Councillors election out of consideration for electoral cooperation with Komeito. While the public has greater tolerance than a decade ago for defence strengthening, there are limits to how quickly any Japanese leader can bring the public along on the most controversial of national security issues. Furthermore, addressing Japan's military insecurities may not be possible without also addressing domestic insecurities around economic wellbeing and long-standing concerns over the ideological commitments of some of Japan's conservative elites (Suzuki & Wallace, 2018).

### **Symbolism over Substance**

While foreign territory strike is constitutionally permissible, militarily plausibility, strategic wisdom, and political acceptability remain questionable. The debate is, nevertheless, increasingly a perennial fixture in Japan (Maeda, 2021: 17). One reason for this is due to foreign territory strike being a wedge issue that could open a path to rolling back Japan's post-war commitment to exclusively defense-oriented defence. *Senshu bōei* is ultimately a symbolic policy stance rather than a strategic doctrine, and like revision to Article 9 of the constitution, rolling back *senshu bōei* retains totemic symbolism for many revisionist conservative politicians looking to transcend the "post-war regime" that, in their view, has undermined Japan's international status and weakened its ability to influence foreign affairs (Suzuki & Wallace, 2018; Miyake, 2020; Smith, 2019: 172).

The term *heiwa boke* (literally, being peace-stupefied) has been a common epithet directed at political defenders of *senshu bōei* and Article 9, and even the Japanese public by these conservatives (Hasegawa, 2014). They argue that Japan's enjoyment of post-war democratic and economic development has been

facilitated by American military protection, and this has enabled a pacifist public, encouraged by the Japanese political Left, to be oversensitive to internal threats from Japan's own military establishment while ignoring the external threats to continued enjoyment of these benefits. Military journalist Taoka Shunji has, however, described the influence in Japan's defense debates of "peace-stupefied hawks" (*heiwa boke takaha*). Taoka (2018, 2021) argues that many political supporters of increased Japanese muscularity are unable to imagine concrete tactical and operational challenges or articulate a strategic rationale for the acquisition of military strength. The concerted focus of many Japanese conservatives on overturning symbolic post-war restraints has facilitated a distinctly revisionist brand of distorted priorities when it comes to national security debates and defence procurement (Asahi Shimbun, 2020a).

Conservatives in the LDP, for example, appeared to intervene in 2018 to push the SDF to proceed with the conversion of the Izumo and Kaga into an "aircraft carrier" despite MSDF concerns over the already tight budget allocations (Handa, 2018). The foreign territory strike debate also exemplifies the prioritization of highly symbolic, technology-driven silver bullet solutions to Japan's security predicaments when other, more prosaic solutions could be prioritised (Taoka, 2021; Newsham, 2020a). Kōno Tarō during the LDP leadership race even termed the foreign territory strike idea a remnant of the "Showa era" (1926-1988) that would be expensive while delivering negligible strategic effects (Asahi Shimbun, 2021). Like "theological" debates (*shingaku ronso*) about Article 9 of the constitution (Hikotani, 2018: 796), the emphasis on the symbolic elements of Japanese security debates and capabilities, including efforts to distinguish between "offensive" and "defensive" capabilities (Iwama & Murano, 2021), often obscures needed discussion about the strategic rationale for ensuring Japan's security and prioritization of defence options given Japan's limited defence budget.

The lack of a domestic debate on making the SDF institutionally fit for purpose is also emblematic of this emphasis of symbolism over strategy. Enhancing the working conditions of SDF members, which compare unfavourably to those in other OECD countries, would go some way to ensuring Japan retains a defence force of sufficient quantity and quality against the background of a demographic crunch (Nishimura, 2019; Newsham, 2019). It would face relatively little public opposition. Establishing a standing joint command system to enhance inter-service operability during peacetime is another priority area that would help the three Japanese services gain greater knowledge about each other beyond “periodic” joint exercises (Heginbotham and Samuels, 2018c), thereby ensuring more effective joint action during a contingency—at virtually no pecuniary cost. Even when the services have a tailor-made opportunity to enhance interoperability, they do not always embrace it. For example, in early 2021 the government decided to procure three medium-sized ships for the Ground Self-Defense Forces (GSDF) rather than for the MSDF. This new GSDF transport unit will carry ammunition, fuel, and food to GSDF troops on the remote islands in Japan’s maritime southwest, and, during a conflict, transport GSDF’s Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade for remote island defence (Kyodo, 2021). Heginbotham and Samuels (2018c) also note that “Japan lacks effective institutional mechanisms to translate specified objectives into force structure requirements or to compete different options against one another”. Such analysis, in their view, would “almost certainly...produce major changes in the roles of Japan’s three military services” where the GSDF have continued to secure much larger budgets than the ASDF and MSDF despite Japan’s “overwhelmingly air and maritime nature of threats” (see also Hornung, 2020c). These capability deficiencies and suboptimal institutional arrangements continue to go unaddressed despite constant reminders of the maritime security pressures in Japan’s southwestern maritime domain and no sign of Chinese restraint (Johnson, 2020; Patalano, 2020; Newsham, 2020b; Japan Times, 2020).

### **Regional Reactions and Defense Spending**

Beijing's rhetorical reaction to Japan authorizing the SDF to conduct strike missions is unlikely to be measured, especially as the debate has recently progressed alongside discussion of SDF contributions to Taiwan's defence (Galic, 2021; Klinger, 2021a). However, without a concomitant and substantive rise in Japan's defence spending, China may not be too disappointed about Japan investing in strike capabilities for missile interdiction as it would stretch Japan's defence resources thinner—and arguably make it a less effective partner for the United States. Japan's strategic interest in Taiwan's de facto independence further emphasises the importance of Tokyo making defence choices that enhance the SDF's ability to better contest the PLA's ability to assert air and sea control in Japan's southwest while providing support to the United States. Heginbotham and Samuels (2018c) note that, with “only a fraction of US forces forward deployed to areas around Japan, the alliance will increasingly rely on Japanese capabilities for deterrence and initial warfighting.” Despite these expectations, the persistence of symbolic contests—and incessant questioning of the United States' reliability in order to win them throughout the political spectrum—shows little consideration for preferences of allies and Japan's new Indo-Pacific strategic partners, and how such debates are viewed in regional capitals (Hornung, 2020b; Newsham, 2020a).

The most significant change that the Japanese government could focus on—and one with both symbolic and practical import—is the formulation of a long-term plan to increase defence spending. Even though former prime minister Abe reversed a decade-long trend of decreases in nominal defence spending, Japan's defence budget in real terms remains effectively flat (Wallace, 2020), and it struggles to sustain even current levels of force generation capacity due to wear and tear, delayed procurements, and insufficient levels of munitions, including for anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems. Meanwhile, even if China starts to spend less in the years ahead, already paid-for procurement orders means that at least

another decade of increases in the inventory of (modern) military systems is already built-in to China's military posture (Heginbotham and Samuels, 2018a: 134).

The topic of defense spending was broached in the recent LDP leadership election, with Kishida, Takaichi Sanae, and Kōno Tarō all recognising the need for substantive increases. Takaichi's support for the NATO target of two percent of GDP was written into the LDP election manifesto and Prime Minister Kishida then announced in November 2021 an injection of ¥774 billion yen (US\$6.8 billion) into the defence portfolio through the supplementary budget. This represents a year-on-year defence budget increase of 5.8 percent—the highest single year increase since the 1990s. The Kishida administration is also likely to sign a five-year Host Nation Support (HNS) commitment with the United States that would increase Japan's contribution by 25 to 50 percent. The government allocated 201.7 billion yen (\$1.76 billion) in its one-year extension in 2020, but speculation is that the new annual HNS amount could be between ¥250 billion and ¥299 billion (US\$2.2-2.6 billion), although Tokyo wants greater say over how the US military spends this money—wanting it to be spent on defence exercises with Japan, for example.

This new HNS commitment, however, may only just exceed the previous highwater mark of 275.6 billion yen in 1999 when troop numbers were lower (37,000, compared to 53,000 in 2021). More than increased HNS contributions, however, American preferences for burden sharing are focused more on an enlarged Japanese defence budget and deepened combined forces and operations (Nikkei Asia, 2021b; Heginbotham and Samuels, 2018c). Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby told an audience at the Hudson Institute in late-2021 that the “practical consequence” of Japan refusing to spend more, even on resilience measures that would help protect American and Japanese forces, is that “it's not going to make sense for the Americans to put our necks out”. The United States would not abandon Japan, Colby argued, but

America would “have to look much more after the well-being of our own troops and our own interests” in some cases, such as the Senkaku Islands (Schadlow and Murano, 2021).

However, to get close to even 1.5 percent of GDP in defence spending, Japan will need to sustain increases of seven percent in the defence budget for well over a decade. There was no indication in the LDP election manifesto of how spending will increase relative to other government priorities, and the NATO commitment was only written into the fine print at the back of the manifesto. Given the most recent fiscal injection came as part of a record post-COVID stimulus bill and was not defence specific, it is questionable whether year-on-year increases of this size will be sustained. Furthermore, 55 percent of the appropriated funds from the supplementary budget were dedicated to supporting defence contractors with payments for contracts already agreed to but delayed. Another 36 percent will go to equipment procurement, although mainly for established systems such as the P-1 maritime surveillance and C-2 transport aircraft, and for which integration into the SDF was also delayed.

Prime minister Kishida’s opportunistic adoption of more hawkish positions in early 2021 to buttress his conservative credentials ahead of the LDP leadership race also raises questions about the depth of his commitment to risking political capital for increasing defence spending (Jiji, 2021b). If foreign territory strike is prioritized over substantive and sustained defence spending increases in the latter half of 2022, Washington D.C. will likely be disappointed. A limited investment in strike capabilities for missile interdiction purposes would do little to relieve the more intense burdens the United States would have to carry in any regional contingency such as establishing maritime control or air superiority versus a Chinese posture designed to prevent just that (Kelly et al., 2014). A substantive investment could be even more damaging, resulting in a negative strategic opportunity cost given other areas of investment foregone.

There are also public opinion opportunity costs to consider. A focus on foreign territory strike capabilities may be unnecessarily provocative when significant and relatively uncontroversial measures focused on enhancing posture resilience and maritime security would better enhance the deterrence generated by the alliance. A bruising debate on foreign territory strike could also weaken public support and alienate the LDP's coalition partner, Komeito, thereby constraining Tokyo's ability to push forward on more controversial but essential defence transformation programs. This includes substantive increases in defence spending but also changes in the geographic distribution of American forces and deployment of weapon systems within Japan to relieve the strategically problematic and domestically corrosive concentration of forces on Okinawa. Tokyo should first undergo a process of strategic rationalization that identifies the needs of partners and Japan's own strengths, enhances the resilience of the US-Japan alliance posture, and continues institutional adaptation to maximize the deterrence pay-off from existing defence spending. More convincing rationales for investment—especially if paired with concerted efforts to address domestic economic and political insecurities going beyond the defence portfolio—will bolster Tokyo's efforts to attract public buy-in for dedicating more resources to defence transformation.

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